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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 001880

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/01/2015

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SUBJECT: MERSIN FLAG INCIDENT OVERSHADOWS GENERALLY
PEACEFUL NEVRUZ CELEBRATIONS

CLASSIFIED BY POL COUNSELOR JOHN W. KUNSTADTER FOR REASONS
1.4 (B) & (D). THIS IS A JOINT AMCONSUL ADANA/AMEMBASSY
ANKARA CABLE.

1. (C) Summary: Nevruz celebrations in southeastern Turkey on March 20 and 21 were significantly larger than in previous years and, with some minor exceptions, peaceful. While local authorities in some cases objected to the use of the Kurdish spelling &Newruz,8 officials approved most petitions of local organizing committees - many comprising DEHAP members - to arrange gatherings. Police were generally respectful of freedom of assembly rights, despite large-scale manifestations among celebrators of support for the PKK terrorist group and its leader, Abdullah Ocalan. The scale of pro-Ocalan slogans illustrates that more progressive Kurdish political views have made little headway in turning Kurdish public opinion away from the PKK, despite Turkey's trajectory during the past year on its path to the EU and signs last summer that southeastern society was fed up with the conflict associated with PKK. The relatively peaceful Nevruz was largely overshadowed by an incident in Mersin in which a number of Kurdish youth attempted to trample (and some claim burn) the Turkish flag, resulting in a Turkish General Staff characterization of the youth as "so-called citizens," and a nation-wide frenzy of pro-flag demonstrations. We have heard credible claims that the flag incident was staged by police provocateurs; it was certainly capitalized upon by an energized nationalist movement poised to find a Nevruz incident to exploit. End Summary.

Nev-What?

2. (U) Nevruz is a celebration of spring, dating back 15,000 years, according to some legends, culminating on March 21. It has a variety of different spellings, depending on where one celebrates it, including Nowruz, Newruz and Norooz. (Note: This cable uses Nevruz for purposes of consistency. The Kurdish version spelling is Newruz, which has emerged as an issue as there is no "w" in the Turkish alphabet. End note.) It is celebrated in Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, Azerbaijan and other central Asian republics. In Turkey, many now associate the holiday with the Kurdish community here, but it has not always been so politicized. Nevruz was reportedly celebrated in Turkey during past decades by taking the day off, picnicking and engaging in outdoor activities. Official celebrations of Nevruz used to consist largely of receptions where government officials and representatives of other Turkic nations got together to break eggs to bring in Spring.

3. (SBU) According to one observer, Kurds in southeast Turkey became more aware of Nevruz in the early 1990s, after northern Iraqi Kurds seeking shelter entered Turkey and subsequently celebrated it in a distinctive way - many in southeast Turkey then reportedly associated the holiday with "Kurdishness." The LES Political Assistant, an ethnic Kurd in Adana, shared the Kurdish legend that characterizes Nevruz as "Kurdish Independence Day" for the community: this story is quite different from other regional explanations of Nevruz which call it a celebration of spring, as well as a celebration of the coronation of King Jamshid of Indo-Iranian lore. The Kurdish version illustrates how oral tradition can affect the politics of a celebration. In this story, the Persian tyrant Dahak has visited a doctor to see how to decrease his pain from two scars on his shoulders. The doctor instructs him to cover the scars with brains, and Dahak orders two Kurdish children to be killed each day. Two Kurds find a way to be hired as cooks at Dahak's palace, and are able to save one of the two children ordered to be killed each day, replacing that child's brains with lamb brains for Dahak's scars. They send the one child they are able save "up in the mountains" to keep them safe. (Note: Presently, many in the Kurdish nationalist community in Turkey refer to the PKK militants in northern Iraq as "the children in the mountains." End note.) Finally, the son of a Kurdish blacksmith is summoned to be killed at Dahak's palace, but the blacksmith objects and leads a mutiny to dethrone the king on March 21.

4. (SBU) As the holiday became politicized in the early to mid-1990s, and claimed by the Kurds as their own holiday,

Nevruz gatherings became possible flashpoints for conflict between security officials and the Kurdish "street" - largely sympathetic to the PKK terrorist group) in southeast Turkey. Up until 2004, police often reportedly put pressure on authorities not to give permissions for celebration gatherings and when they were held, authorized or unauthorized, scuffles and conflict were known to break out between authorities and the "celebrants."

Huge Crowds in Diyarbakir

15. (C) According to some Kurdish observers, 2004 marked the first year that Nevruz was celebrated widely in the southeast with few problems, but they characterized 2005's celebrations as the biggest and best ever. In meetings in southeast Turkey last week, directly following Nevruz, poloff heard from contacts that they generally considered the March 21 celebration, especially in Diyarbakir, to have been a success. Estimates of the number of participants in Diyarbakir AND URFA range in the tens of thousands. Scenes shown on television make it easy to believe that number was achieved, if not exceeded. The Diyarbakir celebrations featured concerts, international visitors, folk presentations, and general revelry for the entire day. The Norwegian Ambassador's attendance created controversy: he allegedly flashed the &V8 sign traditionally associated with the PKK, and said that the fact that people chanted pro-Ocalan slogans showed how far freedom has progressed in the Southeast. (Note: Consulate Adana declined the Diyarbakir Mayor's invitation to attend. End note.) In addition to the bigger than ever celebrations in the southeast, this year also had a new development in terms of official celebration of the event, according to some. Beyond receptions and speeches, official celebrations of the holiday included a more outdoors and folksy component of the celebration: in Istanbul, the Governor and Garrison Commander reportedly even jumped over the Nevruz fire in a scene broadcasted widely by national television news programs. President Sezer in Ankara sent messages of peace and brotherhood to all those who celebrated the holiday and many officials highlighted that this holiday belonged to all Turks in their public remarks.

The "w" Issue

16. (C) Government officials were not universally warm and fuzzy in their approach to the holiday. In Tunceli, for example, the Governor denied the petition of the organizing committee on the basis that their application referred to "Newruz," while there is no "w" in the Turkish alphabet. This seemed contradictory given the existence of a statue located in the city center of Tunceli that does not seem to have attracted the attention of officials. The statue in a prominent location in Tunceli was dedicated by past municipal leaders to a local figure and features a large plaque citing the hero's name - which contains a "w." Moreover, some national newspapers - including Radikal - were full of references to "Newruz" during the week of March 21, and do not seem to have suffered any consequences. In Antalya, when police reportedly banned DEHAP banners using that spelling, marchers simply responded by using the same banners with a black piece of tape over the "w." Tunceli's DEHAP Mayor Songul Abdil Erol stated that despite the Governor's decision in Tunceli, Nevruz celebrations were held without permission in several Tunceli neighborhoods, and while they were not as large as an organized celebration would have been, they were allowed to be carried out without interference. In addition to the "w" issue, scuffles did break out in some towns during early celebrations in Sirnak and Siirt, but most seem to have involved stone-throwing and fists rather than weapons. Another scuffle occurred among Kurds themselves: a major celebrity of Kurdish origin giving a concert at the Diyarbakir event had to leave under duress when he was pelted with rocks by some members of the crowd. According to Abdil Erol, some in the crowd did not consider the singer to be "sensitive enough to the Kurdish issue."

And then came the flag incident...

17. (C) The relative "success" of Nevruz celebrations were largely overshadowed by an incident in Mersin in which a number of Kurdish youth attempted to trample (and some claim burn) the Turkish flag during that town's "celebration." This resulted in a nation-wide reaction that produced a frenzy of pro-flag demonstrations and a Turkish General Staff characterization of the youth as "so-called citizens." In addition to flags being placed on homes and public buildings around the country, schools in the Southeast were called upon to demonstrate in support of the flag, as well. Upon returning from Elazig to Adana on March 25, for example, we were forced to detour around small Golbasi as the streets were filled with primary school children parading in support of the flag. In Mersin, the policeman who saved the flag

that had been under assault was rewarded with cash and medals by local authorities. At least four youth were detained in the incident (reportedly aged 12, 14, 16 and 17), and the Human Rights Association alleges that normal procedures for protecting child detainees were ignored in these cases. It is important to note that Mayor Abdil Erol stressed to poloff in Tunceli that she condemned the Mersin event in the strongest terms, saying the Turkish flag was her flag, too. Similar protestations were offered by an array of DEHAP figures in the press.

Comment

18. (C) During Nevruz celebrations themselves, police and officials in the region appear to have largely exercised good judgment and restraint. The oversensitivity to the usage of "w" in some places, however, demonstrates the continuing official suspicion and hostility toward Turkey's ethnic Kurds. As for the ethnically-Kurdish community, there is an obvious feeling of pride at how well things went and how many people turned out. However, the huge amount of support still shown for Abdullah Ocalan and the PKK demonstrates that Kurdish attitudes are also stuck in the past. This at odds with the fact that last summer many contacts indicated that people were fed up with the violence between the PKK and the government. The fact seems to be that the few educated, Europe-minded leaders in Kurdish civil society have made no progress in turning DEHAP and Kurdish public opinion away from a group on the USG terrorist list. This illustrates the continued lack of political courage and vision within the Kurdish community, including within the much-discussed "Democratic Society Movement" touted by Leyla Zana.

19. (C) Comment, cont'd: We have heard credible reports that the special police unit in Mersin, full of ultra-nationalists, ran an agent-provocateur operation to set up the flag incident. The incident was certainly capitalized on by an energized nationalist movement poised to find a Nevruz incident to exploit. In any event, the political stalemate between the state and Kurdish Turks continues, rooted in both sides, commitment to political old-think: Kurds are unwilling to give up symbols of the PKK; the state is unlikely to want to go any further in providing more cultural and political freedoms than those offered by the democratic reforms, still imperfectly implemented, achieved during the EU process of recent years. Many Kurds, both nationalist and non-nationalist pragmatists, insist on a general amnesty for PKK militants in northern Iraq as the only meaningful sign of reconciliation for moving forward. This state of affairs seems unlikely to change anytime in the near future without some outside stimulus. End comment.

EDELMAN